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ABSTRACT

Rhetoricians have shown both that any description of reality is inherently incomplete and that the only way to cope with this incompleteness is to continually search for more encompassing perspectives. What this says to organizational theorists is that critical approaches to the study of organizational communication should take a rightful place alongside the more accepted normative and naturalistic studies. Through such inquiry, critical research could (1) provide a complete description of the current state of affairs in the organization, (2) examine the development of the described reality, (3) expose constraints in the process of reality definition, (4) determine in whose interest the constraints are being maintained, and (5) decide whether those interests are the interests that should be supported. Through the use of rhetorical theories, organizational consultants can offer members of an organization a conceptual framework for making sense of their experience. Such frameworks would not try to make changes in workers' beliefs as much as they would try to make sense out of what workers already implicitly know: that their organizations are run according to rules they either do not understand or find unfair. (HOD)

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RHETORICAL EPISTEMOLOGY

and

CRITICAL ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

presented to International Communication
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Rhetorical theorists offer many explanations of the relationship between our experiences of reality and our talk. While trying to clarify rhetoric's relation to social reality, they have laid the philosophical groundwork for the study of communication in settings besides the traditional public speaking situation. This paper attempts to examine the utility of the literature on rhetoric and epistemology[1] for organizational communication scholars.

"Social Reality" and Organizational Communication

"Social reality" has become a very important phrase for organizational communication theorists. The focus has shifted in organizational studies from purely quantitative analyses of operationalized constructs to the formation of those constructs themselves. Such studies describe members' social reality, ie., the shared beliefs, values, and meanings manifested by members in their everyday activities--what they take to be true.[2] The concept of organizational culture echoes this interest in finding out how members create, transform, and maintain their social order.[3] The growth in popularity of naturalistic research methods, which try to describe organizational life from the members' points of view, is providing rich empirical data on the nature of organizational life.

Besides providing a basis for the construction of relevant quantitative measures, information about an organization's social reality is directly useful to organizational change agents. Paving the way for new projects, arbitrating strikes, and filling vacant positions can all be done more effectively if current meaning

systems are understood. Common values can be appealed to, compromises can be worked out, and needs can be met. If members' understanding of their situation is ignored in favor of pre-determined (usually quantified) criteria for decision-making, adherence to the resulting decisions is not so likely.[4]

Such an idyllic characterization of the utility of the social reality construct might cause some consternation, as well it should. It leaves too many questions unanswered. Whose definition of reality in the organization are we to listen to and act upon? How do we know when we have the true reality of the members? Assuming that we can come to understand members' realities, what are our responsibilities with regard to it?

These questions are not unanswerable--practitioners provide practical, situation-dependent answers to them all the time. "Those in power get to enforce their reality." "I do what I conscientiously think is best for the organization." "I do the job I'm hired to do." At a theoretical level, however, one would be forced to "account" for those practical decisions in rather vague terms. Power, for example, helps describe unequal or unfair relationships between members, but does not explain such relationships. Nor does it, by itself, give guidance as to what should be done. The notion of social reality needs to be grounded in a more encompassing framework, with a discussion of how realities are created and sustained and how ethical judgements and allotments of resources are made.

In short, what is needed is a philosophical exposition of social reality. The literature on the relationship between rhetoric

and epistemology attempts to provide such an account. Most essays recognize the social nature of meaning structures and the importance of human perspective in our interactions with the world, but they offer quite different descriptions of the status of notions like knowledge, social reality, Reality, and rhetoric. We may be able to extrapolate from these efforts to produce coherent and relevant accounts of social reality to enrich our understanding of the social reality of organizations.

Rhetoric and Social Reality

In this section we will consider three ways of characterizing social reality. All three acknowledge both the existence of our everyday world which cannot be wished away and the social nature of meaningful experience. Rhetoric has a central role in all three. They highlight different aspects of our everyday experience. For our purposes, however, we do not need to determine the right- or wrongness of any of them. We will rather just attend to the conclusions they suggest about the status of social reality and ethical responsibility.

The first position embraces the notion of a truth which is absolute, ie., independent of human consciousness of it, yet recognizes the contingent character of knowledge.[5] Absolute truth is posited logically; we must assume the existence of truth independent of us if we are to make sense of the notion of falsification, in this view. Social reality is the human reality, the perspective individual or collective humans bring to their world. It is always incomplete and at best will only approach the absolute reality. With this paradoxical situation in which we can never

posit anything with absolute certainty, but assume that absolute truth exists but is unattainable, the movement toward the truth is both necessary and the best we can do. "Critical rationalism" is the process by which we continually question our current beliefs, holding them open to refinement if more satisfactory beliefs are suggested. We are ethically responsible for making inquiry as fair and thorough as possible.

This position highlights the importance of self-questioning as a mode of personal, scientific, and social progress. In so doing, it posits the existence of an ultimate reality which can never be surely known. The notion of progress toward truth is problematic for this position, which can offer no account for how we would know when we were actually getting closer to that truth. The initial assumption of a separation between social reality and ultimate reality leaves us no absolute criteria for evaluating our current social reality, but requires an implicit coherence theory. The criteria for what counts as adequate justification or falsification are consensually determined and shared.

The second position assumes that there is a reality independent of us, but that we can be in direct contact with it.[6] The objects of our experience have meaning by virtue of the relationships in which they stand to each other and to us. We have control over some of these relationships, but not others. For example, the relationship "gravity" will continue to exist between my pencil and the center of the earth, whether I attempt to deny it psychologically or counteract it by holding my pencil in the air. The relationship "hate," however, is objectively real yet more easily modified: I might change my perspective and enter a rela-

tionship of "tolerance." Reality is the collection of all the relata and the relationships in which they stand; the physical status of certain relata is not given priority. The particular relationships we stand in are a product of our past experiences and our present projects, which give us unique perspectives on things. Rhetoric, the description of reality through language, allows us to take the perspective of others, to share their views on some objects and perhaps modify our own orientations.

This position highlights the independent nature of our world. Its objective status is not contingent upon the meanings it comes to have for us. Because our orientations to the world evolve from our limited, sometimes personal perspective, it is rare that we ever come to complete knowledge of any particular phenomenon, and we must always hold open the possibility that there are perspectives we have not yet entertained. There are some objects which seem exhaustively described, like the shape of the earth. We have looked at it from every perspective we can imagine and still find it to be spheroid. This counts as knowledge, or truth which is believed because it has been adequately justified. The perspective that a group of people share about the world is that group's social reality. It is incomplete, and may very well even be wrong--clouded by values which prevent members from seeing the truth. Not all perspectives have been considered in any group's social reality, which is a partial version of the ideal complete reality for which we strive.

The third position highlights even more the connectedness between humans and their world.[7] The world is not contingent upon

any particular thought processes, but the relations which give phenomena meaning in experience are relations from a particular point of view, ie., from a consciousness. Position 2, because of the apparent objectivity of such relations (we can't wish away gravity), assumes that objects in the world belong to a universal order which humans can come to know only incompletely. Position 3 makes no claim about the inherent nature of any particular order, but only asserts that any order we do ascertain will always be from a particular human perspective which is situated within a particular culture, tradition, current project, etc. Thus each human consciousness "opens up" the world in somewhat unique ways, yet sharing the same world (being born into the same physical world with a host of cultural constructs, language, etc.) makes most of everyday experience quite similar.

Social reality, in position 3, <u>is</u> reality. It is thoroughly grounded in everyday life, in the "realities" of material existence, values, language, plans, histories, etc. The notion of a a-social reality is useless in this view; even it is posited from a particular perspective. By highlighting the inherently meaningful nature of all experience such that we experience phenomena in the context of our current projects, this position demands that attention be given to how experienced phenomena come to have the meanings they have for us. We experience phenomena <u>as</u> something, situated in linguistic, cultural, material systems of significance. We take up and extend these implications in our everyday actions in the world.

These three positions begin from quite different assumptions

about the relationship between social reality and some absolute reality, yet the prescriptions resulting from all three positions are quite similar. They establish an ethic of inquiry, in which we should question the stance we current hold, look for alternatives, and attempt to understand the implications of our own position in order to question it more thoroughly with alternatives from other perspectives. Such an ethic has also been proposed by Apel, who recognizes that any negotiation of value claims must take place in discourse between human beings.[8] He suggests two ethical criteria for action:

1. The action should support the preservation of the human race.
2. The action should support the realization of the ideal speech situation, in which arguers are equal in power, all opinions are sought, and the argument is never considered closed.

Apel's ethical criteria are based, not on some particular value but on the situation in which decisions are make: the a priori of communication. We can't assume the exhaustive rightness of our current beliefs, so we must set up a situation in which they can be most fairly argued and evaluated. The rhetorical positions' prescriptions are quite similar.

Implications for Organizational Communication

The important question is whether the philosophical and ethical discussions among rhetoricians can offer any illumination to organizational theorists. I would like to suggest that the various rhetoricians' ultimate adoption of a critical ethic suggests that

the recognition of the social nature of reality calls for a dedication to critical research in organizational studies as well. Rhetoricians have shown both why any description of reality is inherently incomplete at best (and systematically misleading at worst), and that the only way to cope with this incompleteness is to continually search for alternative perspectives which are more encompassing.

What this says to organizational theorists is that critical approaches to the study of organizational communication should take a rightful place alongside the more accepted normative and naturalistic studies. The latter two to some extent disallow the possibility of questioning the reality already in place. Normative research enters the organization already assuming a set of research procedures and techniques.[9] Using measurement devices, scales, forced-answer questionnaires, etc., they couch the experiences of organizational members within their pre-determined construct systems. Any information gathered cannot exceed the limits of the constructs assumed. Naturalistic research attempts to overcome this narrowness by allowing the members to speak for themselves; a category system is developed as the data is gathered.[10] Ethnographies of organizations, descriptions of organizational culture, are perhaps the most rigorous examples of naturalistic research.[11] The attempt is to provide complete descriptions of members' meanings, procedures, beliefs, values, plans, etc. Some naturalistic researchers try to reconstruct the rules which are explicitly or implicitly followed by the members, so that the reader could, if necessary, "pass" as a member.[12] Both naturalistic and normative research tries to provide accurate descriptions of the organiza-

tion's current reality.

Critical research in organizations has a different aim, or more accurately, an additional aim.[13] Critical research explicitly questions the current assumptions which both members and researchers make about the organization (thus critical studies can be focused upon either theory or specific organizations). Descriptions of an organization's social reality is only a means to an end--the explication and evaluation of that reality. Extrapolating from what we have learned from rhetoricians, we can suggest a series of functions which critical research should fulfill.

1. Explicate current reality. Such an explication is not limited to one type of research: quantitative or qualitative. Rather, the interest is in providing as complete as possible a description of the current state of affairs in the organization. It would not be adequate to limit this either to the quantitative analysis of a pre-determined construct or to the subjective meanings of the members themselves. Harre and Secord's dramaturgic analysis or Goffman's or Sack's descriptions of member knowledge as a set of rules for behavior serve as examples of descriptive techniques which could productively accompany more basic subjective descriptions or normative accounts.[14]

2. Examine the development of the described reality. Researchers can provide complete descriptions of what is only by considering how it got to be that way. For example, it is not enough to note that an organization has an incentive system which pays workers a bonus for items produced over a specific rate. It is important

to know also that the incentive system was a result of a last-ditch effort by management to avert a strike several months previously, or, alternatively, that the program was instituted over the objections of workers, who feared its potential to weaken worker solidarity. Thus the account of how things got to be the way they are gives the researcher some basis for knowing what they are: "examples of strike-breaking by management," or "increased opportunities for workers."

3. Delineation of constraints in the reality-definition process. If our experience is social, such that what we come to believe is at least partially a product of communication with others, it is important to expose constraints in the process of reality definition. The rhetoricians are explicit about this. The way we come to know must be examined, so that what Habermas called "systematically distorted communication" can be recognized.[15] The management which institutes an incentive program over the protests of workers has the power to enforce its definition of the situation. The program is more importantly "good for workers and good for the company" (management's definition) that "bad for worker cameraderie and good for management control" (workers' definition). The decision-making process about such a program is not conscientious inquiry, in the rhetorician's sense, if the decision is really made before workers' opinions are asked, or if their opinions are not given equal weight in the decision.[16]

4. In whose interest are these constraints maintained? In any practical situation, there are bound to be constraints on the process of reality-definition. Power is usually unequally distri-

buted, and time is almost always in short supply. The point here is not to think that all constraints could be removed, but to determine in whose interest they are being maintained. Such a determination need not assume that some individuals are consciously constraining the realm of discourse in their own favor, although that may certainly be the case in some instances. It is likely that many of the constraints will be lodged in procedural and structural aspects of the organization. Kanter has documented how the everyday operating procedures of most organizations implicitly deny women equal participation in decision-making processes.[17]

5. Evaluation of these interests and commitment to change. Once the system for creating and maintaining the reality of the organization has been characterized so that we can see what interests it is serving, and how each member's actions explicitly or implicitly support those interests, we must decide whether those interests are the interests which should be supported with our attention, resources, and participation. This is a commitment which can certainly be talked about and negotiated, but which seems to require some kind of individual decision in the end. A commitment to change is manifested in concrete action in particular situations, and involves more than just changing one's point of view. Embracing the view that reality is social requires that we take responsibility for the society we have; claiming victimage by the "system" may have elements of accuracy but does not absolve responsibility. Explicit recognition of commitments allows one to see even the most coerced actions as decisions: "I choose to forego satisfying relationships with my coworkers rather than endure the stigma and loss of comforts which accompany unemployment."

Such a statement almost certainly would not make a worker change his or her mind about staying on the job with the new incentive program, but it does clarify the relations he or she stands in with regard to both personal and societal values and to his or her employer. Testing the limits of the controls one perceives others having over one is an initial step to making changes. Is it really the case that the only alternative to the worker besides working under the new incentive program is unemployment? Is it really true that the workers have no power against the institution of the new system?

Change, as perpetrated by the organizational researcher, can come in at least three ways.

1. The first way is no different from the option that any person has to effect change, and that is to effect a personal manner which is in keeping with the tenets one ascribes to in one's philosophical or theoretical writing. If one espouses the value of inquiry and fair argument, one can incorporate that in a personal style of thinking and argument style which is most conducive to "genuine conversation."[18]
2. The development of new constructs and theories which focus upon inequality, power, and change also demonstrates a dedication to the ethic of inquiry. If normative theory deals with organizations as reified objects with pre-determined and unquestioned goals (such as efficiency and control), normative theory must be supplanted with theory which has the requisite variety to recognize distortion, account for it, and suggest modifications.[19] Constructs such as reifica-

tion (which is used to talk about our willful victimization at the hands of our own social constructions) are examples of such theoretical work.

3. Practical guidance of people in organizations is necessary if they are to acquire the skills necessary to make changes in their lives. This includes both conceptual and behavioral skills. For example, members might feel at the mercy of the political nature of their organization--they lack input into decisions which affect them, and their exclusion seems random, malevolent, and unfair. Applying the theories developed as described above, organizational consultants offer members a conceptual framework for making sense of their experience. Such frameworks do not try to make changes in workers' beliefs as much as they try to make sense out of what workers already implicitly know: that their organizations are running according to rules they either don't understand or that are unfair. Relevant theories should be about such rules--spelling them out so that workers can recognize them and learn to work within them.

Teaching behavioral skills follows from this shift in understanding. It is not enough for a secretary to understand that his or her boss takes advantage of their hectic office in order to pawn off work which is really the boss's responsibility. It is not enough to recognize this as an unfair exercize of control. The secretary must be taught how to do something about it. Assertiveness training, for all the bad press it receives in academia, has at least given some people the basic interpersonal skills they need to gain some element of control in their worlds. Saying "no," as well as more complicated skills like setting up a co-op

or filing a successful grievance, can be taught. How organizational researchers can do this kind of "commando" work and retain their access to organizations has been described by Browning and Koch.[20]

Conclusion

This essay demonstrates that the philosophical work done by rhetorical theorists provides guidance for organizational theorists as well. The commitment to critique which comes with the recognition of the social nature of experience is equally applicable to the organizational setting. Some guidelines for doing critical research in organizations have been offered, in keeping with the recognition of the compelling nature of such a commitment.

NOTES

[1]For a review of this literature, see Michael C. Leff, "In Search of Ariadne's Thread: A Review of the Recent Literature on Rhetorical Theory," CSSJ, 29 (1978), 73-91. This essay will focus particularly on three positions discussed in Richard Cherwitz and James Hikins, "The Rhetorical Implications of Perspectivism," 1981 SCA Convention, Anaheim, Calif.; Michael Hyde and Craig Smith, "Hermeneutics and Rhetoric: A Seen but Unobserved Relationship," QJS, 65 (1979), 347-363; C. Jack Orr, "How Shall We Say: 'Reality is Socially Constructed Through Communication'," CSSJ, 29 (1978), 263-274.

[2]Ernest Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality," QJS, 58 (1972), 396-407, might be considered a forerunner of such research in the speech communication discipline. The SCA/ICA-sponsored Summer Conference on Qualitative Approaches to the Study of Organizations evidences the continued interest in such descriptive research.

[3]Michael Pacanowsky, "An Analysis of Organizational Culture: A Theoretical Overview," 1979 ICA Convention, Philadelphia, Penn. An issue of Administrative Science Quarterly devoted to the qualitative study of organizations dealt with the concept of organizational culture in depth: ASQ, 24 (1979), 519-712.

[4]Peter Block, Flawless Consulting (Austin, Texas: Learning Concepts, 1981).

[5]Orr, 1978, best exemplifies this position.

[6]Cherwitz and Hikins, 1981, best exemplifies this position.

[7]This position is an extrapolation of the ideas presented in Hyde and Smith, 1979.

[8]Karl Otto Apel, Towards a Transformation of Philosophy, trans. Adey and Frisby (London:Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980).

[9]See Daneil O'Keefe, "Logical Empiricism and the Study of Human Communication," SM, 42 (1975), 169-183.

[10]Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, The Discovery of Grounded Theory (New York: Aldine, 1967).

[11]Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures (New York: Basic Books, 1973); an often-cited example is W.F. Whyte, Street Corner Society (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

[12]See Susan B. Shimanoff, Communication Rules: Theory and Research (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980); for an example, see William Labov, "Rules for Ritual Insults," in David Dudnow, ed., Studies in Social Interaction (New York: Free Press, 1972), pp. 120-169.

[13]See Astrid Kersten and Terry Pickett, "A Critical Interpretive Theory of Organizational Communication," Summer Conference on Interpretive Approaches to the Study of Organizations, Alta, Utah, 1981; Stewart Clegg and David Dunkerley, Organization, Class and Control (Boston,(Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980).

[14]Rom Harre and P.F. Secord, The Explanation of Social Behavior (Totawa, N.J.: Littlefield, Adams, 1973); Erving Goffman, Behavior in Public Places (New York: Free Press, 1963); Harvey Sacks, "Hotrodder: A Revolutionary Category," in George Psathas, ed., Everyday Language (New York: Irvington Publishers, 1979), pp. 7-14.

[15]Jurgen Habermas, "Systematically Distorted Communication," in Critical Sociology, P. Connerton, edit., (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1978).

[16]Douglas Ehninger, "Argument as Method: Its Nature, Its Limitations, and Its Uses," CM, 37 (1970), 101-110.

[17]Rosabeth Kanter, Men and Women of the Corporation (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

[18]Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, trans. Barden and Cummings, (New York: Continuum, 1975), pp. 325ff.

[19]J.K. Benson, "Organizations: A Dialectical View," ASQ, 22 (1977), 1-21; M. Keeley, "Organizational Analogy: A Comparison of Organismic and Social Contract Models," ASQ, 25 (1980), 337-62; Kersten and Pickett, 1981.

[20]L.D. Browning and S.E. Koch, "A TheoryEmphatic Approach to Organizational Consulting," ICA Convention, Boston, 1982.